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ABSTRACT

It has become the role of student support services to delivery strategies to enhance academic achievement and success for their students. In this paper, several strategies are described that several school districts in South Carolina used to bring about change. One strategy involved adopting a comprehensive guidance program that promotes and allows for accountability and evaluation of personnel as well as district-adopted programs. A second strategy involved lowering the counselor-to-student ratios. A third strategy is the use of basic human relations skills in dealing with students, parents, administrators, and teachers. A fourth strategy involves providing strong leadership locally through a guidance director or principal, district leadership through a district director/coordinator of guidance services or superintendent, and state leadership through a state director of guidance services. (JDM)

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by

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Chapter Eight

A Variety of Parent Involvement Strategies: *Enhancing Program Delivery through Productive Relationships*

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As members of the support staff in a school, much of what counselors do to promote student achievement requires parent involvement. Parent involvement may be on an individual basis, as occurs when working directly with a parent to correct an identified student need, which may be academic, social, or behavioral. Counselors' work is based primarily upon the needs of children and the promotion of healthy minds and lifestyles. Parents' insight and involvement is most beneficial in the area of problem solving, as is their willingness to participate in team initiatives to achieve educational goals on behalf of their child.

Parents Vary

Many parents feel they have entrusted the education of their child entirely to schools, and they want to assume little or no responsibility for their child's education. I fully recognize the parent as the child's first teacher, but the truth of the matter is that not all children enter our schools ready to learn. There are no criteria for parenthood, no litmus test that one has to pass to become eligible, so children vary greatly in their experiences before they enter school.

Recognizing that children enter the world symbolically as a blank page, their experience script and the color and shape of their vision and desire for continued learning influence what they learn. Public education in particular is entrusted with the responsibility of educating students from many and varied psychosocial, cultural, and economic backgrounds. Although students have a certain degree of shared experiences, they also have experiences that are not

shared. These nonshared experiences are based upon economic and family factors that cultivate an appreciation for lifelong learning. Children reared in homes where parents exhibit a thirst and appreciation for education tend to acquire a similar attitude. For the most part these homes are equipped with books, newspapers, magazines, computers, and so on. These families' lifestyle includes vacations, recreation, hobbies, theater, and the arts.

As one can see, the playing field is not level from the beginning. Therefore, it is not surprising that when readiness tests are administered to preschoolers, some will test not ready for first grade. From the onset of their public education experience, some students find themselves in a catch-up mode. It then becomes the role of student support services to develop strategies to enhance academic achievement and success for these students.

Strategy 1: A Comprehensive Guidance Program

The first student support strategy is to adopt a comprehensive model of guidance program delivery in grades K to 12. Such a model promotes and allows for accountability and evaluation of personnel as well as district-adopted programs. Emphasis should be placed upon the implementation of programs with proven efficacy. In Berkeley County the guidance program includes these components:

- Social skills development
- Violence prevention
- Peer mediation
- Communication skills
- Decision-making skills
- Cooperative learning
- Substance abuse prevention
- Goal setting
- Parenting
- Coordination with and referrals to community agencies
- Sexual harassment prevention
- Cultural diversity training
- School career preparation
- College exploration
- Mentoring
- Advocacy
- Behavioral assessment

Although the counselors are not directly responsible for all of the aforementioned, they do function as the first line of defense. As

gatekeepers, counselors seek to ensure that no child is left behind educationally.

Many efforts are made to create a social support network to bolster students' social and emotional success. Because many of our students remain in this area, we establish linkages with many former students. They are invited back to our schools as mentors, guest speakers, speakers for Career Day, school committee members, and other roles.

In another network, the guidance director for the county serves on a multiagency, collaborative committee formed to provide a comprehensive action program to help missing and exploited children. This action program, called M/CAP, affords all schools the opportunity to seek support for students from available agencies. The guidance director for the county also serves on the Moncks Corner Mayor's Committee, which recognizes the achievements of students with disabilities thorough awards and scholarships. The counselors at each school also work to support new students through a buddy system.

Strategy 2: Lower Counselor-to-Student Ratios

> In our efforts to be all that we can be, counselors are being pulled in too many directions. In many cases we are becoming far removed from the work we have been professionally trained and prepared to do. Paperwork has become our foe to the point where documentation requires more effort than the performance and completion of the services we provide. We are unable to function efficiently without mandated registrars or clerical support personnel.

There is a direct correlation between counselor-student ratio and the effectiveness of a comprehensive guidance program. In South Carolina, counselors battled to get the ratio reduced to one counselor per 500 students. As members of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, South Carolina schools follow the guidelines provided by this association, which include a counselor-student ratio of 1:500. Given the number of clerical and administrative duties that counselors routinely do, the 1:500 ratio is too great. The counselors in South Carolina logged many conversations with the state superintendent of education regarding this issue. In 2000, the state superintendent earmarked Excellence in Middle Schools funding to hire additional nurses, guidance counselors, or school resource officers. For the past two years, Berkeley County has used this funding to hire additional guidance counselors in eight of our ten middle schools.

This mandate has resulted in improved student services. [Radd (1998).] Guidance counselors are not afforded the luxury of working in plush offices devoid of interruptions only with voluntary clients having scheduled

appointments. Instead every day is an adventure, and all children and families who show up must be dealt with in a caring and timely fashion. The state superintendent continues to work with the legislature to lower the ratio.

Strategy 3: Counselors as Problem Solvers and Communicators

When counselors and parents differ in their goals and visions for a student's achievement, counselors may face personal criticism. When facing criticism, counselors may need to utilize mediation or conflict resolution skills to avoid an impasse. Addressing a problem at the lowest possible level goes a long way in deflating anger before the situation escalates. During the course of any given day, counselors must use basic human relations skills in their dealings with students, parents, administrators, and teachers. When their efforts work smoothly, as they often do, counselors receive little recognition of the vital services they routinely provide.

As counselors we value parent involvement. Any involvement by parents indicates that they are focused upon the needs and the welfare of their children. The most difficult group of parents to reach are the ones who appear to be indifferent. This indifference is shown by not attending PTA meetings, scheduled open houses, or scheduled parent-teacher conferences; not sending back signed papers; not returning phone calls; vacationing during the school session; and the like. These are a few of the concerns I hear from counselors. At the same time, however, counselors are also sensitive to the "why" of this seeming indifference.

Some parents' efforts may appear to be misguided or based upon misinformation or limited information. In such cases, an open dialogue between the parents and the counselor can go a long way in remedying the situation. While recognizing differences in perceptions, attitudes, cultures, and socioeconomic levels, counselors strive to formulate a professional working relationship with parents and significant others in order to engage in mutual goal setting to meet the needs of students. The multicultural training counselors are now receiving helps them promote effective communication by better understanding cultural differences and reaching out to parents on their own ground. Berkeley County has parent centers located in several schools, where parents can receive education in child development, the workings of the educational system, the availability of further adult training, and so on.

We make no efforts to contain parents by denying them access to public information. Like any citizen, they have the right to address the local school board. We afford our parents the opportunity to serve as volunteers at the school level as room mothers/fathers; media center aides; sponsors for extracurricular

activities; members of the PTA, School Improvement Council, or Strategic Planning Committee; and in other roles. At the district level, parents are involved in strategic planning initiatives, the school board, the Health Advisory Committee, the Safe and Drug Free Schools Committee, the Prevention Board, and the Oversight Committee for School Construction, among others.

Strategy 4: Guidance Leadership

> Counselors are great mediators, moderators, facilitators, and taskmasters. The very presence of school counselors allows for the smooth delivery of educational services. We are recognized as teachers, and in many cases we begin our careers among the ranks of teachers. South Carolina public schools follow the South Carolina comprehensive developmental guidance and counseling program model, which is based upon the comprehensive guidance program model. The model serves to ensure accountability and provides the basis for the delivery of guidance services. Knowledge of this curriculum model provides the framework for peer support, supervision, and evaluation.

We are aware that the delivery of complete guidance services requires competent leadership via a guidance director or principal, competent district leadership via a district director or coordinator of guidance services or superintendent, and statewide leadership via a director of state guidance services. There is a direct correlation between the presence of qualified and trained guidance personnel at every level and the effective provision of services. Often counselors devote so much time to taking care of others, including teaching staff and administrators, that they do not have adequate time to take care of themselves. It is vital that all counselors engage in advocacy on their own behalf and that of their profession. We take pride in the students we have touched, shaped, and helped to transform into productive citizens.

About the Author

Carolyn Price has served for six years as director of guidance and counseling services for the Berkeley County School District, Moncks Corner, South Carolina. Prior to holding this administrative position, she was a high school counselor, a counselor for teens with substance abuse problems, and a high school science and physical education teacher. She has also been a college faculty member and an active member of the Trident Technical College Board of Trustees. In writing the school district's experience, she was assisted by Shirley Ford, at-risk coordinator. Carolyn can be reached at CarolynPrice@berkeley.k12.sc.us or at P.O. Box 465, Pinopolis, SC 29469.

Radd, T.R. (1998). Designing an Outcome Based School Counseling System and Program. In J.M. Allen, *School Counseling: New Perspectives & Practices* (pp.93-98).